

Reporters with Conflicts of Interest in Israel

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A recent assignment of mine covering Israel's presumed links to the assassination of Hamas leader Mahmoud al-Mabhouh provoked some more thoughts about the New York Times reporter Ethan Bronner. He is the Jerusalem bureau chief who has been at the centre of a controversy since it was revealed last month that his son is serving in the Israeli army. Despite mounting pressure to replace Bronner, the NYT's editors have so far refused to consider that he might be facing a conflict of interest or that it would be wiser to post him elsewhere.

Last week, when suspicion for the assassination in Dubai started to fall on the Mossad, a newspaper editor emailed to ask if I could ring up my "Israeli security contacts" for fresh leads. It was a reminder that Western correspondents in Israel are expected to have such contacts. The point was underlined later the same day when I spoke with a leftwing Israeli academic to get his take on Mabhouh's killing. I had turned to this Ashkenazi professor because he counts many veterans of the security services as friends. At the end of the interview, I asked him if he had any suggestions for people in the security services I might speak with. He replied: "Talk to Eitan Bronner. He has excellent contacts." Naively, I asked how I could reach this expert on the veiled world of the Israeli security establishment. Was he employed at the professor's university? "No, ring the New York Times bureau," he responded incredulously. Oh, that "Eitan"!

A more interesting question than whether Bronner is now facing a conflict of interest over his son serving in the Israeli army is whether the NYT reporter was facing such a conflict long before the latest revelations surfaced. Could it be that it is actually incumbent on Bronner, as the NYT's bureau chief, to have such a conflict of interest?

Consider this. The NYT has form when it comes to turning a blind eye to reporters with conflicts of interest in Israel — aside, I mean, from the issue of the reporters' ethnic identification or nationality. For example, I am reminded of a recent predecessor of Bronner's at the Jerusalem bureau — an Israeli Jew — who managed to do regular service in the Israeli army reserves even while he was covering the second intifada. I am pretty sure his bosses knew of this but, as with Bronner, did not think there were grounds for taking action.

Shortly after I wrote an earlier piece on Bronner, pointing out that most Western coverage of the Israel-Palestine conflict is shaped by Jewish and Israeli journalists, and that Palestinian voices are almost entirely excluded, a Jerusalem-based bureau chief asked to meet. Over a coffee he congratulated me, adding: "I'd be fired if I wrote something like that."

This reporter, who, unlike me, spends lots of time with the main press corps in Jerusalem, then made some interesting points. He wishes to remain anonymous but has agreed to my

passing on his observations. He calls Bronner's situation "the rule, not the exception", adding: "I can think of a dozen foreign bureau chiefs, responsible for covering both Israel and the Palestinians, who have served in the Israeli army, and another dozen who like Bronner have kids in the Israeli army."

He added that it is very common to hear Western reporters boasting to one another about their "Zionist" credentials, their service in the Israeli army or the loyal service of their children. "Comments like that are very common at Foreign Press Association gatherings [in Israel] among the senior, agenda-setting, elite journalists."

My informant is highly critical of what is going on among the Jerusalem press corps, even though he admits the same charges could be levelled against him. "I'm Jewish, married to an Israeli and like almost all Western journalists live in Jewish West Jerusalem. In my free time I hang out in cafes and bars with Jewish Israelis chatting in Hebrew. For the Jewish sabbath and Jewish holidays I often get together with a bunch of Western journalists. While it would be convenient to think otherwise, there is no question that this deep personal integration into Israeli society informs our overall understanding and coverage of the place in a way quite different from a journalist who lived in Ramallah or Gaza and whose personal life was more embedded in Palestinian society."

And now he gets to the crunch: "The degree to which Bronner's personal life, like that of most lead journalists here, is integrated into Israeli society, makes him an excellent candidate to cover Israeli political life, cultural shifts and intellectual life. The problem is that Bronner is also expected to be his paper's lead voice on Palestinian political life, cultural shifts and intellectual life, all in a society he has almost no connection to, deep knowledge of or even the ability to directly communicate with ... The presumption that this is possible is neither fair to Bronner nor to his readers, and it's really a shame that Western media executives don't see the value in an Arabic-speaking bureau chief living in Ramallah and setting the agenda for the news coming out of the Palestinian territories."

All true. But I think there is a deeper lesson from the Bronner affair. Editors who prefer to appoint Jews and Israelis to cover the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are probably making a rational choice in news terms — even if they would never dare admit their reasoning. The media assign someone to the Jerusalem bureau because they want as much access as possible to the inner sanctums of power in a self-declared Jewish state. They believe — and they are right — that doors open if their reporter is a Jew, or better still an Israeli Jew, who has proved his or her commitment to Israel by marrying an Israeli, by serving in the army or having a child in the army, and by speaking fluent Hebrew, a language all but useless outside this small state.

Yes, Ethan Bronner is "the rule", as my informant notes, because any other kind of journalist — the goyim, as many Israelis dismiss non-Jews — will only ever be able to scratch at the surface of Israel's military-political-industrial edifice. The Bronners have access to power, they can talk to the officials who matter, because those same officials trust that high-powered Jewish and Israeli reporters belong in the Israeli consensus. They may be critical of the occupation, but they can be trusted to pull their punches. If they ever failed to do so, they would be ejected from the inner sanctum and a paper like the NYT would be forced to replace them with someone more cooperative.

When in later years, these Jerusalem bureau chiefs retire from the field of battle and are

promoted to the rank of armchair general back at media HQ – when they become a Thomas Friedman paid to pontificate regularly on the conflict — they can be trusted to talk to those same high-placed officials, explaining their viewpoint and defending it. That is why you will not read anything in the NYT questioning the idea that Israel is a democratic state or see coverage suggesting that Israel is acting in bad faith in the peace process.

I do not want here to suggest there is anything unique about this relationship of almost utter dependence. To a degree, this is how most specialists in the mainstream media operate. Think of the local crime reporter. How effective would he be (and it is invariably a he) if he alienated the senior police officers who provide the inside information he needs for his regular supply of stories? Might he not prefer to turn a blind eye to a scoop revealing that one of his main informants is taking bribes, if publishing such a story would lose him his “access” and his posting? This is a simple cost-benefit analysis made both by the reporter and the editors who assign him that almost always favours the powerful over the weak, the interests of the journalist over the reader.

And so it is with Israel. Like the crime reporter, our Jerusalem bureau chief needs his “access” more than he needs the occasional scoop that would sabotage his relationship with official sources. But more so than the crime reporter, many of these bureau chiefs also identify with Israel and its goals because they have an Israeli spouse and children. They not only live on one side of a bitter national conflict but actively participate in defending that side through service in its military.

This is a conflict of interest of the highest order. It is also the reason why they are there in the first place.

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